

The Greek Life Self-Study: A Powerful Process for Change on Campus

Carmen G. Neuberger
Gail Short Hanson



The authors describe the work, findings, and recommendations of a self-study team that examined Greek life at a liberal arts college and the compatibility of its Greek organizations with the mission of the college. A review of changes at the college after five years suggests the efficacy of this type of self-study, which employed visiting educators as an integral part of the assessment process, for bringing about significant and enduring reforms of student life.

Introduction

Since the early 1980s, institutional self-studies of Greek life have been employed by a number of liberal arts colleges as vehicles for reform and, in a few cases, for radical change in the fabric of their campus communities. High profile incidents of organizational misconduct, typically associated with hazing, harassment, and alcohol abuse, combined with high membership in Greek organizations, created conditions that have called for growing scrutiny of fraternities and sororities by both the faculty and administration (Hirschorn, 1988).

Carmen G. Neuberger, Executive Director, American College Personnel Association, Washington, DC. Gail Short Hanson, Consultant, U.S. Department of Education, Alexandria, VA.

The focus of this article is a self-study of Greek life initiated in 1988 at Dickinson College in response to faculty concerns about the influence of Greek organizations on the life of the college. The self-study model employed by Dickinson was unique in student affairs practice because of its use of visiting educators as an integral component of the assessment process, and it is this aspect of the study process that will be highlighted in this article. The findings and recommendations of the self-study, and a consideration of the changes in Dickinson's campus life five years following the study, suggest the effectiveness of the comprehensive self-study approach in bringing about constructive and enduring reforms to Greek life on a liberal arts campus.

Review of the Literature

The Dickinson study was precipitated by disturbing trends in student conduct and a campus social life dominated by Greek organizations. It was also driven by an overarching concern for the quality of the college's intellectual life and a desire for consistency in the principles underpinning the College's academic and extracurricular activities (Select Committee on Greek Life, 1989). The perceptions and concerns of the Dickinson community mirror the many grievances against Greek organizations that are expressed in the literature on collegiate student life.

Maisel (1990), Kuh and Lyons (1990), and Bailer and Whipple (1990) question the compatibility of Greek organizations with the academy's educational purposes, values, and attitudes. In particular, they call attention to organizational practices that promote status distinctions, reinforce conformity, dependence and social apathy, and denigrate individual worth and dignity. Some focus on the racism, sexism, and religious discrimination evident in Greek activities and the conduct of Greek affiliates (Ackerman, 1990; Maisel, 1990; Smith, 1987) and on the troubling association between Greek affiliation and alcohol abuse (Ellis, 1989; Hirschorn, 1988; Seitzinger, 1989; Smith, 1987; Tampke, 1990). Members of the Dickinson community also shared Kuh and Lyons' (1990) assessment of the fall rush for freshmen as a process that limits personal choice and opportunities for individual growth and Kalof and Cargill's (1991) contention that Greek affiliation reinforces traditional male-dominant, female-submissive attitudes.

A number of institutions have made formal inquiries into the place and function of Greek organizations in campus life. The greatest media attention was, perhaps, focused on Colby College in 1984 when it withdrew recognition from Greek organizations and instituted a new residential

life program (Hirschorn, 1988; Maisel, 1990; Seitzinger, 1989; Smith, 1987). Colby's bold move, taken after "an intense period of self-study" and after earlier efforts at reform were judged a failure, spurred other colleges to action. Colby's self-study was conducted by a 19 member commission, 11 of whom were members of Greek organizations. The commission employed campus hearings, a survey, visits to other campuses, and topical reports to gather information. This comprehensive approach offered a model for other institutions contemplating formal assessments of Greek life (Hirschorn, 1988). In 1988, after a three year review that included trustees, faculty, administrators, and students, Franklin and Marshall College also withdrew recognition from its Greek organizations (Hirschorn, 1988). A review committee at Bowdoin College announced sweeping reform in the college's expectations for Greek organizations, including the requirement that national fraternities seeking recognition must be fully coeducational (Hirschorn, 1988). Lafayette College, where 65% of the student body was affiliated with Greek organizations in the 1980s, elected to reform their Greek system by establishing specific goals for regulating Greek life and expressing a clear intention to eliminate chapters that did not meet the new standards (Ellis, 1989). The decision to reform the Greek system or withdraw recognition from its organizations generally turned on whether Greek-letter social organizations were deemed to be compatible with the values and goals of a liberal arts education, and the process by which this question was examined usually took the form of an inclusive, multifaceted self-study.

The Dickinson College Case

Dickinson is a liberal arts college in south central Pennsylvania which in 1989 had an enrollment of just over 2,000 students, about 55% of which were women and 45% men. At the time of the study, over half of the student body was affiliated with fraternities or sororities, and nearly 25% of the men lived in fraternity houses owned and operated by the college. Sororities had never requested on-campus housing and, by tradition, rented off-campus space for their meetings. Dickinson students generally possess competitive academic credentials and express a high level of satisfaction with their educational experiences at the college. The college also enjoys strong support from a loyal body of alumni.

In May 1988, Dickinson College trustees appointed a Select Committee on Greek Life to carry out a critical examination of Greek-letter social organizations. Dickinson's study model incorporated several frequently used elements: a solicitation of written comments from the campus community; a survey of students, recent alumni, faculty, administrators,

and trustees; a separate survey undertaken by the Alumni Council and supplemented by alumni meetings on campus, held during Homecoming Weekend, and in three major cities on the Eastern Seaboard; and formal hearings with testimony from representative campus constituencies. A distinctive element of Dickinson's approach was the involvement of a team of outside educators whose assessments of Dickinson's campus life were sought to test the Select Committee's observations and to broaden the context in which the Dickinson community took stock of itself.

The Select Committee

Chaired by an alumna-trustee, the Select Committee comprised four trustees, all of whom had graduated from Dickinson College, four tenured faculty members, four upperclass students, and four administrators, of whom two were members of the student affairs division and another who served as secretary and staff member to the Committee. The Committee was constituted by the Board of Trustees Chairman and President of the College at the request of the faculty and was charged with "the study of the place and function of Greek-letter fraternities and sororities in the life of Dickinson College" (Select Committee, 1989). At its first meeting in May, 1988, the Committee developed the following three goals for its work: (a) to evaluate fairly the Greek contribution to and impact upon the life of Dickinson College; (b) to identify opportunities that could improve student life outside the classroom; and (c) to communicate with the College's many constituencies in order that the process of the Greek life review would itself serve to build consensus and community. The findings of the Committee and its 26 recommendations, which related to virtually every aspect of student out-of-class life at the College, were adopted by the Board of Trustees in October 1989 and implementation of its recommendations began in the spring of 1990.

External Consultants

As an important part of its information-gathering strategy, Dickinson's Select Committee assembled a team of four educators from other institutions for a campus visit. Visiting team members were all involved in student affairs and academic administration, but were intentionally chosen from institutions with "a variety of social terrains." The Select Committee believed that by involving educators from settings different from Dickinson's, it enhanced the chances for detecting aspects of campus life that members of the community could not perceive. Using the model employed for regional accreditation visits, the consultants were supplied with a selection of printed materials and study questions which were reviewed in preparation for their visit.

The campus visit combined formal and informal meetings between the consultants and a cross section of the campus community. Formal

exchanges were held with the college president, faculty representatives, student affairs and other administrators, student leaders, most of whom were Greek, and faculty, staff, and alumni advisors to the Greek-letter organizations. The consultants also met with individuals who had prepared reports on Greek affiliation and academic performance, student affairs funding among Dickinson's peer institutions, and various aspects of student and residential life. Consultants ate their meals with students in the campus dining hall and spent an evening visiting fraternities.

At the conclusion of their visit, the consultants met with the Select Committee to share preliminary findings, then followed up with prepared written reports, the full texts of which were included in the final *Report of the Select Committee on Greek Life at Dickinson College*.

Findings

Members of Greek-letter organizations impressed Select Committee members with their affection for and loyalty to their groups. In their responses, they identified the benefits derived from Greek membership, which included such frequently made claims as the ability of fraternities to make integration into campus life more easy, the sense of community and lasting friendships they provide, the opportunities they give to develop leadership and social skills and to perform social service, their encouragement of high ideals and academic achievement, and the network of contacts they engendered that would extend beyond college.

The Select Committee also took note of the 100 year history of Greek life at Dickinson and of students' constitutional right to associate freely, a right that was respected by the College by both tradition and expectation. The Committee's careful study of students' academic performance, social conduct, and attitudes failed to produce persuasive evidence that membership in a fraternity or sorority or that the presence of these organizations at Dickinson undermined the mission of the College. Its study did identify aspects of extracurricular and residential life at Dickinson that worked against the type of healthy, balanced out-of-classroom student life that would allow fraternities and sororities to function productively.

Discussion and Recommendations

The Select Committee supported the continued recognition of Greek-letter social organizations at Dickinson College and offered 26 recommendations to strengthen the College's extracurricular and residential programs to better match the caliber of its academic program. The recommendations called upon the College to clearly articulate its mission and values in the text of the Student Code of Conduct, to negotiate a formal statement detailing what the college and its fraternities expected of each other, which included each organization's confirmation of a policy of non-discrimination in membership selection on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, handicap, or age.

The Committee recommended deferring recruitment and new member education (rush and pledging) for Greek organizations until the fall semester of students' sophomore year. Just as students are not expected to declare their academic major until their sophomore year, they should not enter hastily into lifetime affiliations. They also stressed withdrawing recognition from any organization found guilty of hazing as defined by Pennsylvania law and the Student Code of Conduct. The College was encouraged to explore interest in and possibilities for establishing co-educational Greek-letter social societies. This was recommended to counter some of the gender problems remaining from historical male dominance at Dickinson due to its history as an all-male college until the turn of the century.

With respect to residential and student life, the College was urged to improve opportunities for coeducational living and for participation in educational and counseling programs that foster healthy relationships between male and female students. Preferential housing arrangements had been extended to fraternities by the College in the mid-1960s on the basis of agreements made with all-residential fraternities. The college purchased all the houses owned by fraternities and built college-owned substitute housing that provided ample social space and a central dining facility supported by a required board plan. All agreements that seemed to imply that fraternities were entitled to occupy these houses in perpetuity were targeted for elimination by June 1990. Fraternities were to be compensated for improvements they had made in the facilities and assessed for any damage done to the College buildings they occupied. A Housing Board was recommended to oversee assignment of group

housing. The Board was to include two tenured faculty members (one of whom would serve as chair), two administrators, and the student body president. The director of residential life was designated as non-voting staff to the Board.

The Committee observed that enrollment growth during the 1980s had overwhelmed space for all-college social events and for smaller social activities and study in the residence halls. It called upon the College to build or acquire additional facilities and to make more creative use of existing space by extending hours, scheduling for more efficient turnover, and encouraging joint sponsorship of activities. The need for increased recruitment, support, and training of additional faculty and alumni to serve as student organization advisors was also noted. Finally, the Select Committee recommended strengthening efforts to educate students, individually and in groups, about newly revised policies such as the Code of Conduct, Alcohol Use and Registration of Social Event Policies, and about the administration of effective sanctions, using peer educators and role models as often as possible.

Follow-through and Assessment

Five years after the recommendations of the Select Committee were implemented, the Greek system at Dickinson is a much healthier and more equitable part of student life. In general, the self-study model employed by Dickinson College has been effective in facilitating desired changes with no major deleterious effects. According to the Associate Dean of the College, who served as staff support person to the Select Committee, the success can be credited to the Dickinson self-study model. The two most important recommendations were (a) the end of privileged housing for Greek men and (b) the end of freshman rush. The elimination of privileged housing for Greek men revoked the assumption of "group rights" to specific housing. Once groups had to earn the privilege of living together in college housing, a mechanism existed to hold them accountable for their conduct. The elimination of freshman rush created an atmosphere in which first year students could focus on the freshman seminar experience and become acclimated to the college before making the decision to affiliate with a fraternity or sorority or to remain independent. Faculty members are generally satisfied with the outcomes of the Select Committee reforms, as evidenced by the absence of complaints and deliberations about student social life at monthly faculty meetings. Students understand that the unregulated parties of the 1970s and early 1980s can no longer occur without major repercussions. While a few trustees and alumni remain unconvinced that Dickinson Greek life was in need of reform, the extensive self-study process produced genuine and constructive changes in campus life without exposing the College to the media spotlight and protests some other colleges have experienced.

Dickinson's current Greek Advisor sees the one key omission in the College's self-study process as the lack of involvement of national fraternity and sorority representatives. From his perspective, the concerns of the institution have been addressed, but the psychosocial development of students has suffered, and the effect of sophomore rush on housing has been predictable. Because sophomores cannot live in Greek houses, fewer residents are available to fill the houses and this has resulted in assignment to smaller houses with less social space. Also, Greek society leadership opportunities are necessarily postponed until after the fall semester of sophomore year, when students are just joining and being educated as new members.

Five years after the Select Committee's Report, the measurable changes in Dickinson's campus life include:

1. *Gender equality in access to special interest housing.* Sororities now apply for and are assigned group housing on the same basis as the fraternities.
2. *Increase in Non-Greek Social Events.* There are considerably more all-campus social activities sponsored by independents and other student groups, such as the Multicultural and Foreign Language Houses.
3. *Decreased Focus on Alcohol at Social Events.* The abusive use of alcohol as the focal point of social events has diminished with the involvement of peer alcohol educators and increased accountability of event sponsors. In addition, there has been a very positive student response to a new facility built by the College for campus-wide social events, which was affectionately dubbed "The Lumberyard" after its previous tenant.

Conclusions and Implications of the Self-Study Model

Although Greek society membership has decreased from 58% of the men and 55 percent of the women in 1989 to 32% of the men and 33% of the women in 1994 (42% and 43% if the freshman class is removed from total) and although those who belonged to fraternities during the period when they dominated Dickinson culture perceive Greek life to be declining, the faculty, administrators, and current students believe that a healthier balance has been achieved in campus life. In individual interviews conducted in 1992, seniors expressed their agreement with the Select Committee

reforms, despite the resulting upheaval in the student culture they knew as freshmen. Students still complain about the strict control of alcohol necessary to comply with federal and state laws as well as Interfraternity and Panhellenic Council guidelines, but their satisfaction with their experiences at Dickinson is evidenced by the 84 percent four-year graduation rate.

In the long term, Dickinson's student profile may change as a result of the Select Committee reforms, but current students appear enthusiastic about the new evolving mix of extracurricular opportunities. Although student social life at Dickinson College will continue to be a lightning rod for criticism and reform, as it is at most institutions, the College has constructed a powerful and durable tool for change in the self-study model, one that can be adapted for many uses.

Self-studies are by definition shaped by the unique demographics and circumstances of each college that chooses to employ them. The fact that Dickinson College owns all its Greek houses gave it considerable leeway to effect change. In addition to involving all college constituencies in the process of information-gathering and debate, seeking outside assessment was instrumental in legitimizing the findings and recommendations for reform. The self-study model is well suited to the deliberative and participatory natures of academic communities. At Dickinson College it proved itself an effective vehicle for change.

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